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Chelmsford

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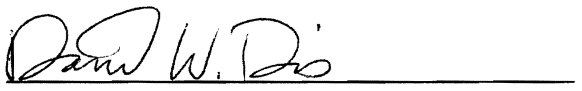

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Chelmsford

(TITLE)

BY

Daniel Davis

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Critical Preface to *Chelmsford*

Traditionally, the term *deux ex machina* refers to the intrusion of a God-like being into the events of a play: in order to bring about a desired conclusion, the playwright introduces a supernatural deity who restores order. Witness the statue of Hermione at the end of *A Winter's Tale*.

More modern texts call for a broader interpretation. The symbolic rain of frogs at the end of Paul Thomas Anderson's film *Magnolia*, or the disappearance of Charles Lindbergh in Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*, qualify as *dei ex machina*. These are events created not by a supernatural being, but by the author himself. Their intent is usually to convey some sort of symbolism; the toxic black cloud in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, for example, represents the intrusion of technology—and its side effects—into modern society.

The first *deux ex machina* in my novella, the disappearance of Alex Little, is representative of the strange occurrences that happen in every day life, events beyond our understanding: chance meetings, coincidences, etc. I decided to take one of these events and blow it entirely out of proportion: not only does a little child go missing, but his body is not where reason and logic dictate that it should be.

The second *deux ex machina* represents the forces that it would take for us to turn a blind eye to what we don't understand. A tornado is a natural phenomenon that is entirely outside of human control. Again, I chose to exaggerate the randomness and unpredictability of tornados, by creating a twister that came, literally, out of the clear blue sky. These two *dei ex machina* play off each other, with the second ultimately replacing the

first. It is important, however, that neither event receive an explanation, for such events *have* no explanation in reality.

In order to help instill this sense of realism in *Chelmsford*, I wrote it as a regional piece. The town of Chelmsford is an amalgamation of Central Illinois towns, much as Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County represents a certain part of Mississippi. Cormac McCarthy also provided another blueprint; his novels reflect the landscapes they are set in. *Outer Dark*, set in the haunted and convoluted wilderness of Appalachia, is dense and meandering; *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West*, set on the Texas/Mexico border, is taught and bare, with occasional sprawling passages that are as open to interpretation as a western sunset.

Initially, I'd intended the totality of my thesis to reflect a sense of minimalism, in the vein of Raymond Carver and Ernest Hemingway. However, as my thesis grew, I determined that a minimalist approach wouldn't be appropriate for all of the stories. Certain pieces, such as "Hollywood Chicken" and "Thirst," could be written in the minimalist style; their plots are deceptively straightforward, with much emphasis being placed on subtext. Thus, "ornate" or "flowery" language would provide a distraction (except in the context of "Chicken's" Patricia, who occasionally—and only half-correctly—uses such language to elevate her sense of self-worth).

For other stories, however, I had to veer from my original intent. "Robert" is a good example. The story revolves around an escalating sense of tension, culminating in a surreal beating that, normally, the main character (Sean) would never participate in. The plot of this story required more elaborate writing, with a focus on metaphoric language

and imagery. Much the same could be said of "Shadow Boy" and "Concrete," which chronicle two men's decent into mental chaos.

One of my goals from the beginning was to keep a solid, linear plot. To do this, I revolved as many of the stories as necessary around the character of Cassandra Little, who isn't given a story of her own. She is a minor character in her own tale, up until the end, when the events switch from being about her (aka, Alex) to being about Chelmsford as a whole (the tornado). This symbolizes the overall shift of plot, and reflects my purpose in writing the piece—one story slowly gives way to another. A casual glance at a local newspaper, spanning a week's time, will show how true this is in everyday life.

Writing *Chelmsford* was a unique, eye-opening experience. The collaboration on the project was both intense and immeasurably beneficial. I was able to view my own writing from a distance, to dissect it and see what worked and what didn't. My graduate training provided the tools; writing the thesis, and discussing it with my committee, gave me the opportunity to use the knowledge I'd acquired. Such experiences are the backbone of graduate-level creative writing, and provide the motivation for further self-examination and writing growth.

The Well

Alex Little raced across the town of Chelmsford, with a pissed off sheriff and two bounty hunters in hot pursuit.

Chelmsford isn't big, but July in Central Illinois tends to stretch the miles. The day was dry and hot, the kind of heat that weighs a body down, that grinds away at the skin. Eight-year-old boys tend to last longer than most, but even they begin to tire after a while. Alex Little was no exception. He barely felt the heat though, because he had a destination in mind; and besides, he was a hearty kid, used to being left on his own during the summer days while his mother worked or slept off her drunk. July was no match for him; nothing was a match for him.

The other boys weren't so lucky. If any concerned neighbors—and there were quite a few in Chelmsford—had seen them, the boys might've been pulled off the sidewalk, rushed into air conditioned interiors and force-fed cool glasses of water. Sweat rushed down their faces by the gallon; sticky summer sweat, the kind that makes a cold shower so delightful in the evening, even if you you're young and would rather be destroying worlds with intergalactic dinosaurs.

Kevin, the sheriff, led the way, partly because he was older and stronger, partly because the other two, Billy and Scott, were into their roles as inferior characters. Also, there was the fact that Kevin had gotten a hold of a real fake shotgun, pump action, easily the biggest weapon any of the four boys owned. You let the bigger guns lead the way—even a twenty-first century kid in a nineteenth-century mindset knew that.

The boys' progress across town can easily be tracked, but their path isn't of much concern. It's the destination that matters. Alex was heading towards the grove of trees at the back of Mark Greene's property, at the far western edge of town, just outside city limits. Specifically, Alex had the well in mind—the abandoned well that had existed on the property for close to a hundred years. Alex was the only boy he knew of who'd had the courage to remove the cover—most children under the age of twelve believed the stories told about the well. Even a few adults. The stories were that bad, and that old. But Alex was tough, he had to be, and he didn't believe in ghosts.

If Greene had been in a position to watch his property, he would've stopped the boys. He was still nervous about the well, had put the cover on it when he'd moved into the house because he'd heard the stories, too, and whether or not he wanted to admit it, he believed them. But Greene was in his study, writing a paper because the head of his department was pressing him to get published again, and he'd admittedly been slacking the past few years. Extenuating circumstances only extenuated for so long.

Alex reached the grove of trees a couple minutes ahead of the other boys. They were still out of sight. He didn't hesitate, he didn't think; it would be nice to say that he did, that this young boy was cautious beyond his years. But in truth, Alex Little was reckless, a born troublemaker, even if the trouble was his own. He didn't think about precautions or safety. He didn't think about consequences, was only vaguely aware of the concept. When he pushed the cover off the well—Greene hadn't thought to seal it permanently, and this fact would be noticed later—he stood at the rim, staring into the darkness, looking for handholds, looking for leverage.

To paraphrase an old saying: Alex Little stared into the well, and the well stared into him. By the time the other three boys arrived, Alex Little had vanished into shadow, and the rest of Chelmsford followed him.

Thirst

It was like a cliché. *Lassie*, for God's sake. *Timmy's in the well! Run, get help!*

Cortland was laughing on the inside. He kept as stoic an expression on his face as humanly possible, but yes, he was laughing. Nor did he consider it wrong or imprudent. If this had been a movie, the audience would have laughed. *Really? In the twenty-first century, a boy falls down a nineteenth century well*?

Others were laughing, Cortland was sure. The firemen, who had to ride out in the back of Mark Greene's pickup because the truck couldn't make it. The paramedics, who had somehow managed to get the ambulance to the edge of the grove. The other officer there, Mitchell, looked scared, but that might be an act. Cortland had never liked Mitchell—tried too hard, kissed too much ass. At least Chief Fischer wasn't one to give in to such things, always put Mitchell in his place. The other officers, however, had a tendency to eat it up. Except Cortland. Perhaps because he, too, had once been like that. Eager to succeed, until he found that there was no success to be had. Not in Chelmsford, or the whole of Charleston County for that matter. Greene was a teacher—at a community college, no less—and he was just about the most prestigious person Cortland had ever met.

Greene wasn't with them. He was back at the house. Mitchell had said something about that, but Greene and the Chief were old friends, so there was some leniency permitted. Cortland didn't mind. Where was Greene going to go? And why? A kid fell down a well; that wasn't a crime, just a tragically amusing accident.

One of the firemen approached the well with a bundled-up coil. It took Cortland a moment to realize that it was, in fact, a rope ladder. The fireman began stripping off his heavy suit, down to his corduroys and pants. Cortland let a smile slip across his face; all this thing needed to push it over the top was a man in his underwear.

The Chief's hand fell on his shoulder. Cortland jumped and turned, ready to apologize. The Chief wasn't a hard man, but he had standards, and one of those was that respect should be shown at all times. Their motto was *To Protect and Serve*, but the citizens of Chelmsford needed little protecting except from themselves, and the Chief thought that the most important part in serving a community was to respect its inhabitants. This included everyone—from firemen stripping in public, to little boys who fell down wells.

Cortland wasn't a small man by any means; he'd played football all the way through his senior year of high school, and in the six years since he hadn't lost much of his frame. He'd gained a little extra weight, but it helped round him out, fill in some of his weaker spots. He was of average height, but his build made him seem taller, broader across the shoulders. He worked out excessively, not necessarily in an attempt to improve his physique—that wasn't necessary at this point—but because it helped him relax. Being a cop, even in a small town where the most pressing matters concerned drunken teenagers, was stressful. If anything, that's why he hadn't been able to maintain a steady relationship in the three years since he'd joined the force. The women all complained that he was too *stressed*, or too *worried*, that the only time he seemed normal was when he was doing something physical—jogging, working out, sex. Cortland couldn't understand

how that could be taken as a bad thing; it was merely a way to live, a way of finding something to do in this godforsaken town.

Chief Fischer, on the other hand, made Cortland look like a wimp. That was it—a wimp, a snotty elementary school playground loser, hiding behind the bushes while the popular kids strolled by. Fischer wasn't much taller, and he was less broad at the shoulders—a "wiry" man, someone had once described him—but he had an authoritative presence that had gotten him reelected for more than a decade. He'd been the youngest Chelmsford Police Chief at the age of twenty-seven, and he was most likely going to be the oldest. Because people trusted him to get the job done—his constituents, the city council, and his fellow officers. Everyone knew that Glen Fischer tolerated no bullshit, not even his own, and laughing in the midst of a tragedy was more than enough for him to fire one of his men, despite three solid years of service.

But if the Chief saw Cortland smirking, he made no sign. Instead, he let his hand rest there a moment, staring at the fireman. Cortland watched the Chief's face for a second, then followed his gaze. Together, they watched the fireman tie one end of the rope ladder against the nearest tree. Then he gently rolled the ladder into the well. It fell with a soft thud. The noise wasn't loud enough to echo.

Cortland had glanced into the well. They all had, at first—calling the boy's name repeatedly, even though the kids who'd reported the accident had already done so. There'd been no answer, which Cortland supposed wasn't a good sign. There were multiple possibilities—the boy was unconscious; perhaps he was too far down to hear, because no one knew exactly how deep the well was—but one outcome was more pressing than

the others. For some reason, it prompted them to hurry; the thought that they were already too late spurned them to make up for lost time.

"Is it going to be long enough?" Cortland asked. Mentally, he kicked himself and said, *That's where the hero comes back with a witty remark.*

"Probably," the Chief told him. He let go of Cortland's shoulder. "If it's not, they'll just get a longer one."

An equally amusing statement—but no tart reply came to Cortland's mind. The Chief was beyond the reaches of his sense of humor. Glen Fischer had that effect on people.

"Dale," the Chief said, "I want you and Pete to search the area. Not just the grove—the field, Mark's yard, those trees over there, neighbors' yards. Everywhere. I've radioed for a couple more men, whoever's in the area. You can take one of the paramedics with you, in case you find anything."

"You don't think he's in the well?"

"The boys didn't actually see him go in. We're running on the assumption that there's nowhere else he could've gone; and probably, there isn't. I know Alex Little. He's mischievous, but he's not cruel. If he's watching this, the joke would've gotten old long ago. Plus, I don't think he would've taken it this far."

Cortland wasn't so sure. He'd never met Alex's father, though he'd heard plenty, but he knew a few things about the boy's mother. Cassandra Little was exactly the sort of person to fuck up, and then do everything in her power not to take responsibility for her mistakes. Odds were, Alex was already back at home, though they would know for sure in a couple minutes, when Officer Davenport radioed back. That was why the Chief had-

n't trusted a phone call—because Cassandra Little would steal your wallet, wave it in front of your face, and claim she hadn't taken it.

He didn't say this, however. He just nodded and went off to get Mitchell. They rounded up one of the paramedics—some young kid fresh out of medical school, or whatever you had to do to drive an ambulance—and began searching the grove, calling out Alex's name every once in a while. They were all certain of finding nothing, but they'd been ordered to try. You didn't disobey one of the Chief's orders. Even the paramedic, pimply-faced and bored as hell, knew that.

As they began to scour ground that had been thoroughly covered—perhaps as an excuse to get them out of the way, an idea which didn't offend Cortland, but seemed to rankle Mitchell—Cortland began to think, for the first time, of Cassandra. Not as she was now, but as she'd been when he'd known her. Which was arguably the same—she looked older now, true, but her attitude, who she was, hadn't aged at all. In a way, that was admirable; few people could say that they'd changed so little over the years. But it wasn't necessarily good in Cassandra's case; she could've stood for a little changing.

But we wanted her because of who she was. We were just kids ourselves.

Teenagers, really. Adolescents. Idiots. And Cassandra Little—still married at the time, unhappily so—was the not-quite-hot-but-watchable woman who lived next door to Cortland's best friend, Benny Goldman. She was the woman who had a tendency to walk around in her back yard in her underwear, mindless of the fact that the hedge running the length of the chain link fence hid almost nothing from the kids gawking at her in the next yard. Or not as mindless as she seemed. She had to've seen them. They were teenagers; they weren't subtle. And Cassandra was the kind of woman who knew herself.

That knowledge wasn't sexy, per say, but it was powerful. She wasn't beautiful, and she had a reputation that overshadowed any personal relationships she could ever hope to make, but she was confident in herself. She knew her place, she knew what people thought of her, and she knew the attraction she held to boys who didn't know any better.

It didn't hurt that her husband was rarely home. In fact, Cortland had never once seen the man. He knew what Vince Little looked like only because of the pictures that made the paper when he was arrested upstate; the man had never been at the house on those summer afternoons, and from what Benny had said, rarely before and after. A career criminal spends little time at home, and there were rumors—known especially to teenagers—that Cassandra took full advantage of her husband's absence.

Fuel for youthful lust; the kind of thing that boys eat up, swallow whole, and hold in their loins like a warm flame. Perhaps there *was* something perverted about three teens staring at a half-naked woman through a fence, huddled close together so they could all see what the others were seeing. Perverted and oddly intimate, the kind of thing that psychoanalysts seize on and run with. But Cortland couldn't help seeing it as innocent, even after Jake went with her into the house, holding her hand as though he were being led to his own execution, not glancing back and gloating as Cortland thought he himself would've done.

She'd chosen her afternoon well. Hot and damp. She wasn't doing anything, as she rarely did—she just lay there, occasionally getting up and jogging in place or stretching. Putting on a show; probably even did it on the days they weren't watching. But for some reason, that afternoon she'd lain for about an hour in her chair, eyes closed, basking

in the heat and humidity, and then sat up, turned to them, and said, "You boys want a Coke or something?"

Everything about it was mundane—her voice, the words, her offer. A Coke, of all things. What could be further from what they wanted than a Coke? And yet…the idea was tempting. The heat had sucked the moisture from Cortland's body; it felt as though every ounce of liquid was on his skin, attracting flies and mosquitoes. His mouth was the only dry part of him, tongue swollen in a mixture of lust and thirst. A Coke. When this woman said it, sitting there in her underwear, gazing at them as though they were lawn gnomes…yes, he wanted one.

Perhaps Benny and Jake did as well, but neither said anything. A silence stretched between them—the boys and the woman, broken by the hum of insects and the call of birds and a couple lawnmowers running in the distance, the fragrance of the cut grass slowly wafting towards them. The silence wasn't awkward; it just existed, a natural part of the afternoon. Cassandra seemed at ease with it, as though she experienced it often. A woman so used to shocking people probably didn't shock easily herself.

"Well," she said after a while. She smiled at them casually, as though only half her heart was in it. "Does one of you want to come inside with me, then? My A/C's on."

One of you. Years later, searching for Cassandra's lost son, Cortland couldn't help but grin. It was, in its way, as darkly humorous as the present circumstances. *One of you.* With one phrase, she'd turned them against each other without their even knowing it.

There wasn't much of a battle, though. All three were too scared. Jake was the oldest. He was the tallest, the most mature looking. He would get his license in another

year. He had a girlfriend, he'd already gone all the way with her (no one doubted his claims, not even Benny, who was ashamed of his own virginity). All three had begun shaving, but only Jake had the guts *not* to shave. It wasn't much, but it was enough to give him that ragged air of the sort of man Cassandra usually attracted—the kind of man who would wind up like her husband, either disgruntled, in prison, or both.

They didn't have to fight. Cassandra gave them a few moments, perhaps hoping for a surprise volunteer—her gaze lingered on Cortland, and he shriveled inside—perhaps just enjoying their awkwardness. When none of the boys stepped forward, she pointed at Jake. She didn't seem too happy about it, but she put up a pretense. "You. Come on. It's cool inside."

Jake climbed the hedge. The boys had practice doing this—on the other side of the yard—but Jake stumbled, almost fell off. He kept his footing, but both Benny and Cortland stepped back, as though to distance themselves from him, and Cassandra let a smirk slip across her lips for a second. Then Jake righted himself, and Cassandra walked over and took his hand.

"See you boys later," she said, but she wasn't looking at them. She led Jake inside, and after a few minutes—perhaps only seconds, though who could tell—Benny and Cortland went inside and played video games. They talked, but they didn't mention Jake, and if Benny's mother noticed that a child was missing, she gave no sign of concern.

Jake hung out after that. And yet, neither Benny nor Cortland ever asked about what happened. After a while, Cortland stopped caring. They never watched Cassandra again, though Cortland could see her out there occasionally, never looking towards the yard but never *not* looking, either. As though it hadn't mattered. Benny and Jake moved

away, and though Cortland ran into Cassandra on occasion—including a few times, later on, in an official capacity—she never gave any sign of recognition. It could just be that he'd aged; but that was too simple for Cassandra Little. Cortland had to wonder, as he walked about under another summer sun, if she even remembered Jake at all. If it had only meant anything to them because of their youth.

It didn't mean anything now. At least not in any practical way. It wasn't helping him find her son, who probably wasn't there anyways. He glanced back towards the well, saw the fireman coming out. He had something clutched in his hand, but it wasn't a body. Cortland didn't feel relieved. He felt angry. Angry that a kid could cause such a fuss. And not just any kid—Cassandra Little's kid. Somehow, that just made it worse—he hadn't thought of those days in a while, not in any depth, and looking back on them now, he was embarrassed. What if he'd had some guts back then? Would anything have changed?

The worst part, the scariest part, was probably not. Because this was Chelmsford, and in towns like this, things were meant to be. Not because of predestination or fate, but because people were too lazy to determine their own damned lives—even Cortland, who vented his frustration at his inherent impotence with rigorous physical exertion.

He saw the Chief waving. Cortland waved back, still thinking of Cassandra, then realized that the Chief wanted them to come back together. Cortland whistled at Mitchell and the paramedic—the latter looked just as bored, and now angry at having been made to do something—and led them back in. He started to smile, until he realized that the Chief wasn't. The Chief looked tired and hopped up at the same time, like a man who'd ingested too much caffeine too early in the morning.

"We need to get some more people out here," Cortland said. "If we're going to do a thorough search before the sun goes down."

"That may not be necessary," the Chief told him. "Show him what you found."

The fireman stepped forward. Clutched in his hand was a child-sized ball cap. White Sox. The cap was dirty, beat up; it was also torn along one side, the edges of the tear stained a deep bronze that wasn't red, even though that's the color everyone thought blood should be.

"Jesus," Cortland said.

Mitchell went one further: "That should've been left down there. Evidence."

Kiss-ass, Cortland thought. He almost said it.

"Doesn't matter," the Chief said, before the fireman could reply. "This isn't a crime scene." Then: "Yet. Pete, go radio Jean. Tell her to send everyone out here. Now. And see if you can get a hold of Henry, find out if he's talked to Mrs. Little yet."

Mitchell was reluctant to leave, but did so. The Chief turned to Cortland and said, "Dale. What do you think?"

Cassandra sitting up from the lawn chair, her shoulders slick and bare, her stomach still taught, aged right, a bored smile starting to play at her lips as her head turns slowly, naturally, as though it were the most common thing in the world to ask a young boy lusting after you to step inside for a few minutes, it's cool in here, my A/C's running, do you want a Coke?

"Head injury," Cortland said. He was hardly aware that he was speaking. "Tripped and hurt himself. The hat happened to fall into the well."

"Good." The Chief didn't seem convinced as much as pleased; Cortland wasn't sure what that difference meant, but it made him uncomfortable.

"Any signs of impact?" the Chief asked the fireman.

"No sir. Not that I could see, at least." Meaning, *That isn't what I'm trained for.*

"Dale," the Chief said. "Go tell Pete to have Jean call the Sheriff's department. They've got the resources we need."

"What do we need?"

"Someone to tell us how this boy's hat got in the well."

Cortland relayed the message. It was twenty minutes before the specialist—of what, Cortland couldn't be sure, but the man carried himself as though he were the best at *something*—arrived. Borderline forensics—not that Charleston County could afford anything fancy or creative, but there were a few professionals in the area who could look at a blood stain and tell you what caused it. They were mostly part time. The coroner was one, though he must've been busy, or on vacation.

The man descended into the well, after a talk with the fireman—and, Cortland noticed, some harsh words about bringing up the hat. The man was down there for twenty minutes, with nothing more than a small kit and a flashlight. The sun was beginning to think of setting. Cortland suggested that they begin searching the area again, and the Chief agreed. The men searched Greene's yard—the professor was on his back porch, watching them, but didn't offer to help—and then the neighboring properties on both sides of the street. They asked questions, they took unofficial statements—all of which amounted to the same thing: no one had seen Alex Little all that day, and most hadn't even been around to see the three boys who came after him. The woods on the opposite

side of the field were given a cursory examination, not that a boy with such head trauma could possibly make it that far. There was even talk of bringing a helicopter in.

When the specialist came up from the well, Cortland headed back in. He put Mitchell in charge of the search party; for once, Mitchell wasn't complaining. Perhaps it made him feel important, having some authority for once.

Cortland reached the Chief in mid-conversation. From the look on the Chief's face, it wasn't good.

"Definite blood on the wall, starting at eight feet, then again at fifteen feet, and again at twenty," the specialist said. "Fresh. Fabric from the hat at the fifteen-foot mark. I'll do a check at the lab, but unless two different animals fell down that well today, it's probably a match."

Lab. Like anybody had a lab in the area. Unless this man was from the college, which was possible; a lot of the professors free-lanced when needed.

Cortland was still hung up on the word, so it took a while for the man's meaning to sink in. The Chief caught it right away; he turned and scowled at the well, as though it were a living creature capable of feeling shame. Cortland struggled for a moment to get beyond the humor of it—a joke that went back to his childhood, how Charleston County was about as far from sophistication as you could get—before he realized what the man was saying.

"He fell into the well," he said. Not a question, because by this point he knew.

The man nodded. "Yes. I can't say one hundred percent…but yes. He was in that well."

Was. As in, *He was once upon a time, but now he is no more.*

"Then where is he?"

The man shrugged and went back to his car. Cortland watched him go. It was that shrug that finally did it. Helplessness mixed with confusion mixed with a sense of professional pride: *You wanted me to see if he was in the well, and he was; it isn't my job to explain why he's not in there anymore.*

Cortland laughed. Just once, a short bark that was quickly followed by silence. The Chief let it go—didn't even glance his way, didn't seem to acknowledge the break in composure. Cortland barely noticed; he wasn't thinking of the well anymore, or even the departing specialist. Instead, all he could think of was Cassandra Little reclining in a lawn chair, a Coke in her hand and the cool breeze of her A/C drifting across her body, her skin prickling at the gentle intrusion. All of a sudden, standing beside the well, the evening arriving with what he knew would be a long and thankless night, Cortland was thirsty.

Hollywood Chicken

There was something on Cassandra Little's kitchen floor. Brown and oval, ridged, about half an inch long. Patricia squinted at it, convinced that it wasn't just her failing eyesight that prevented her from seeing it clearly. It was still in the shadow cast by the bottom of the stove. Tucked discretely down there, as if it wanted to be forgotten.

A roach? Patricia had taken note of the accumulated filth in the house. Mitchell would say she was exaggerating, but she wasn't. Pizza boxes, dust, food wrappers, dishes, glassware—the kind of stuff that you're supposed to notice as it gathers up. Patricia hadn't been in the Little household—grand word for it, "household"—in a few years, not since Alex was a toddler, but she didn't remember it being this bad. Of course, the last time she'd been here, Cassandra's husband hadn't been in jail. Maybe he'd been the tidy one.

She hadn't come over immediately after hearing about Alex's disappearance; she'd come over after a sleepless night in which she'd convinced herself she *should* come over. She then spent all day Saturday waiting for the police to leave. She'd half-dreaded that Cassandra's latest boyfriend, some broad-shouldered hooligan, would show up, but perhaps it was still too early for that. Immediately after feeding Mitchell and herself, she'd gathered what was left of the casserole and crossed the street, dreading the encounter with each footstep. She could only vaguely remember the last time she and Cassandra had talked for any length of time. She certainly couldn't remember what words were exchanged—probably just an extended greeting, perhaps a question as to how young Alex was doing. No questions about *Patricia's* children, but that could be because they were

all grown and moved out, and when that was the case, it was generally assumed they were doing all right.

Something slammed itself against the door to her left. The dog. She knew what it was, but it was still a *thing* to her, as no other dog had ever been. Jasper, part Rottweiler, part hell-spawn. It began barking, that deep guttural grinding of phlegm and muscle that you seldom hear outside of horror movies. A fantastic guard dog, the kind that took its job far too seriously.

Patricia listened to the dog scratching at the wood, wondering how long it would take for the beast to claw its way out. She glanced at the kitchen clock, wondering if Cassandra would be back in the room by that time. Why had she left? Probably to use the restroom. Patricia couldn't see Cassandra Little going to the back of her house to cry. She was the kind of woman who took an offered casserole, and instead of putting it in the fridge, left it right on the counter. At least she'd put the demon dog in the garage.

Patricia returned her gaze to the brown object in front of the stove. It hadn't moved. She wanted to get up and walk over to it, but that would be improper. You never study someone else's trash. You accept it and ignore it. A brown spot on an off-white kitchen tile floor stands out, though. If only it would *move*, then Patricia would have an excuse for killing it. People are grateful when you kill their vermin. They don't thank you for casserole, but they thank you for getting rid of a cockroach.

She heard Cassandra's plodding footsteps returning to the kitchen, and quickly put on a sympathetic smile before turning around. As a mother, she was expected to be a rock, a shoulder for everyone. She'd fulfilled that role well enough when her kids were still at home, and she did the same now for Mitchell. Funny, how as soon as the chil-

dren were gone, her husband had become something of a child himself. A capable, mostly independent child, and certainly not a petulant or complaining one—but a child nonetheless, someone who needed looking out after. Patricia did so without complaint, because she'd been taught as a girl that such was the duty of a mother and a housewife: you put up with a lot, and in return you gained the respect and prestige of maintaining a proper, functioning household.

In truth, however, other people's grief unnerved her, made her feel as though she were, in some way, responsible. But that was her dirty secret—not even Mitchell knew about it. She prided herself in that: it took willpower to be duplicitous for twenty-four years, even if this was one of the few secrets she had kept from him.

Cassandra didn't look like a traditional mourner, however. She looked good, at least comparatively; Patricia had always thought Cassandra looked a bit "trashy," as people said these days. She had makeup on, and her hair was pulled back; her clothes weren't neat, and not entirely clean, but they weren't tear-stained or overly rumpled. She didn't look like she'd been lying in bed crying, which is how Patricia would've been in her state—a stroke of intuition that made Patricia look away. Her eyes automatically went to the brown object on the floor.

Not offering any greeting—she'd said only two or three words since Patricia showed up on her doorstep five minutes ago—Cassandra went to the fridge and took out a beer. She grabbed another for Patricia. On her way back to the table, she stopped in front of the stove and glanced down. Bending over, she picked up the brown object with her fingernails. She held it in front of her eyes for a moment before tossing it into the nearest trashcan.

Patricia took the beer, though she hadn't had an alcoholic beverage, other than the occasional cocktail with the girls from her office, in years. She didn't open it, hoping Cassandra would take the hint and offer her a water or juice. But Cassandra sat down and took a swig of her beer. A *swig*. Not a sip, not a swallow, not even a drink. A sailor's swig. She glanced at the door, where Jasper was still wrecking havoc, doing God-knows how much damage to the wood on the other side, but she said nothing. Her expression hadn't changed since Patricia had rung the doorbell.

Patricia wanted to ask the usual palliative questions, but she knew they would either go unanswered, or would be met with a casual shrug that could mean one of a dozen things. So she glanced at the clock again, then at the casserole. She found herself saying, "It's called 'Hollywood chicken,' but it's actually hamburger. A misnomer, I suppose."

Cassandra didn't say anything, but Patricia supposed there was no need for commentary.

"It goes great with peas. Do you have any peas? I could bring some over; I always overstock on greens."

"I do," Cassandra said. Her voice was heavy but not with grief. Shock, perhaps—maybe this was what they called "shock" in the papers and on all those TV programs that Patricia heard about. She didn't watch television, except reruns of shows she'd grown up with, because she didn't want to be bothered keeping up with new shows. She'd almost been suckered in by *Lost*, but had held firm. It kept her nights free, at any rate, not that she ever did much.

"I could fix you something else, if you want," Patricia said, glancing around the kitchen, as though suggesting that the cooking should be done at *her* house, and not here.

This was a house of microwavable dinners and frozen pizzas. And Subway, according to some of the napkins she'd noticed. That, perhaps, at least accounted for Cassandra's figure: trashy though she may be, her body was still something to admire. Patricia felt no jealousy, but then she was Cassandra's senior by more than a decade and had no need of jealousy anymore.

Cassandra said nothing to the offer of cooking, which Patricia took as a silent refusal. A minute passed, during which Cassandra got herself another beer. The only sound came from Jasper's assault on the door, which had waned when Cassandra returned to the kitchen, but had started again when the dog realized that Patricia was still there. To listen to it, one would think there was a lion on the other side, and a wounded gazelle sitting at the table.

The curious thing was that Cassandra didn't seem to resent Patricia's presence. In fact, as Patricia politely looked everywhere but across the table, she seemed to get the sense that she may as well not have been there at all—that Cassandra's mind was entirely elsewhere. As should be expected, though *some* politeness was called for in most situations. A cursory "thank you" for coming over; something along the lines of, "I'm doing all right," even if it was a bold-faced lie. These were *normal* reactions, Patricia surmised—meaning, Cassandra was not acting normally to this at all.

As the silence began to stretch for upwards of two minutes—Patricia's eyes, no matter where they roamed, kept returning to the clock, with its cracked and dusty face—Jasper began a new tactic. The collisions stopped, and for a second there was blessed peace in the garage. Patricia felt part of herself—the part that had always envisioned Jas-

per snatching up one of the neighborhood children and running away with them—relax, until she noticed the doorknob beginning to turn.

She barely stifled her scream. Cassandra turned calmly to the door and yelled, "Quit it the fuck out!"

Jasper did as instructed, though after a brief pause he began ramming the door again.

Cassandra grabbed a third beer. Patricia watched her, and as Cassandra sat back down, she said, "It can open doors?"

Cassandra shrugged.

Patricia turned her gaze to something she'd noticed almost immediately, but had pointedly refused to comment on—a Charleston County Sheriff's Department business card, placed indiscriminately near the edge of the table. It had earlier been closer towards the center, where it had no doubt landed after Cassandra casually tossed it aside, but her repeated movements had brushed it towards the edge. Another light puff of air, and the card would fall to the floor, where it would probably find its way under the cabinets or stove.

In what she told herself was a charitable gesture, Patricia picked up the card and looked it over. "I didn't even know they had these," she said. The card was plain white, and bore no names—not the Sheriff's, not any of the deputies or city councilmen or whoever else one would expect to be associated with the Sheriff's Department. Just an address and two telephone numbers—one of them 911.

Cassandra, as Patricia expected, made no comment, so Patricia took advantage of the opening and said, "They were here a long time. The police, I mean."

She received a noncommittal grunt in response—laced, perhaps, with a tinge of resentment.

Patricia hesitated, as though it were difficult for her to ask the appropriate follow-up: "Do they have any leads?"

"Leads," she knew, was the word you used in a murder investigation, or a robbery, or a situation in which someone did somebody wrong. Perhaps it wasn't the proper word for when a boy fell down a well and then went missing, but it had a nice dramatic flair to it, and truth be told she felt important saying it, important to be involved in a situation in which the word "leads" could easily enter into ordinary conversation. Such were never the happiest of occasions, but then, they hadn't found a body yet, which meant Alex could still be alive. A happy, tearful reunion would ensue—though, Patricia thought, casting a discreet glance around her, it certainly couldn't be held here.

Cassandra looked at her for the first time since opening the door—and, in truth, it was the first moment in which Patricia knew that she was really *there*. Cassandra was inviting her into her world now, and instantly Patricia regretted asking to come. Because it was an angry, desperate world, one far dirtier than this kitchen.

"No leads," Cassandra said. Her voice didn't change, but that was the worst part about it—she seemed detached from the entire situation. Patricia shivered, filing away the phrase "a chill ran down my spine" for future use.

"They were here a long time," Patricia said again, slowly. "I meant to come over sooner, but I felt it best to wait until they had gone."

"They had questions. Lots of questions, but no leads. One of the cops bummed my pack of cigarettes. But no leads." Whereas Patricia had taken a small delight in the word "leads," Cassandra spat it out, as though it had burnt her tongue.

"But they must have some idea. I mean…" But Patricia didn't know what she meant, so she stopped.

"They said he's 'gone.' Whatever the fuck that means."

"I'm sure he's out there," Patricia said, purposely ignoring the ambiguity in such a claim. She followed it up with a declaration that came out more as a question: "I'm sure he's all right."

"He'd better be," Cassandra said, and then shifted her gaze away, kicking Patricia out of her world again. Patricia knew she would not be granted readmission, but didn't feel too upset over it. A small glimpse was more than enough.

Jasper struck the door again—twice, in fact, so rapidly that there seemed to be *two* demon beasts in the garage. Patricia glanced again at her casserole, mourning its destined interment in the trashcan. The casserole was one of Mitchell's favorites, and she had surely gotten his hopes up by making it. That meant she would have to make it again very soon, to keep him from being disappointed. Patricia preferred diversity at her dinner table, but you had to make sacrifices to keep your husband happy.

"I'd best be going," she said, standing. Cassandra made no movement—didn't even acknowledge her. Patricia thought, *How rude*, followed by, *That poor woman*, and then Jasper began trying the doorknob again. If Cassandra noticed, she made no motion to stop it. Patricia waited until she was certain that the door was unlocked, and that the dog stood a very good chance of succeeding, before she high-tailed it out of the kitchen.

"High-tailed:" the exact phrase she would use. "High-tailed" it out of there with a hell-hound snapping at her ankles, and Mitchell's beloved Hollywood chicken left to its dismal fate.

Concrete

He could hear the phone even when it wasn't ringing. A steady, low shrill, the tone reserved for unknown or unimportant numbers. Intentionally annoying—ringtones were meant to catch your attention, none of those miniaturized pop tunes his students preferred. He wanted something sharp and to the point, something that would jar him out of whatever he was doing.

"You could just turn it off," he said. And answered: "No I can't."

He hadn't talked to himself before last Friday. *Meaning, before the child went missing on my property, before people suspected me of being a closet homosexual who murdered small children, before I was put on extended sabbatical that I'm not even entitled to and didn't ask for. Before all that, I didn't talk to myself.*

Alex Little had disappeared on Friday. By Saturday night—make that early Sunday morning, and no sleep in between—Mark was having extended conversations with people who weren't there. His friend, the Chief of Police, who had unwillingly interrogated him (and apologized profusely afterwards, with no sense of suspicion thank God); the Dean of the English Department at Central Illinois Community College, who had phoned Saturday morning to suggest that Mark take the rest of the summer off, perhaps the fall semester as well, and don't worry, your classes will be covered until the end of term, just get some rest and catch up on your research; his friends and colleagues (one and the same, these days), who expressed sympathy—pity, in this case, but Mark embraced it as though it were genuine—and condolences; and most disturbingly, his wife and son, resurrected after six years and just as warm and loving as though his wife's Sat-

urn hadn't struck a concrete pylon after a routine trip to Olive Garden. He hadn't cried until Jess and David showed up, and it came pouring out as it hadn't since they'd first left. By two in the morning, he was worn out enough to drift into unconsciousness, and when he woke up Sunday—to that damned ringtone—he had to admit that he was really talking to himself.

Mark had to walk to the calendar to figure out what day it was. Tuesday. Four days. He'd become a pariah in just four days and one afternoon. He'd talked extensively to his lawyer, who assured him that, legally, he was in no trouble: *Mark, you put a cover on the well, that well was uncovered for almost a century before you and Jess moved in, this town should be thanking you for all the children who* didn't *fall into it, don't worry she can't sue you, and even if she could, which she can't, we would nail her ass to her own trailer door.*

But it wasn't legalities he was worried about. Legalities didn't prevent people from staring at you when you made your only trip outside of the house, and that to Wal-Mart, ostensibly to stock up on groceries, but surely everybody noticed the beer in your cart, and a lot of it too. *Hiding something, Mr. Greene? Drinking something away, Mr. Greene?* Even his own students had watched him with no hesitation and no reservations, as though he were a tiger behind glass, a dangerous curiosity.

"A man's got a right to drink," he said. He was on his…tenth beer? He'd also stopped at the liquor store for something harder, for when the beer ran out. He had never been much of a drinker, at least not in the past five years, and never really before that, either. Just the one year, when he'd been trying to forget what'd happened to his family,

and had only succeeded in making their loss fresher and more immediate. A dark year, that'd been.

"You should write that down, Mark. 'A dark year.' Fuckin' poetry. Publish it, get rich, retire."

Maybe that would settle a few nerves in the department. He was the only English teacher there who wasn't a failed—they always said "struggling," but the term only applied to the youngest—writer. His own writing was safe—predictable slop about the great works of literature, replete with enough cross-references to earn him a few pats on the back by fellow academics. He didn't quite believe that creative writing was something for students and sell-outs, but he didn't quite *not* believe it either, and as such refused to get drawn into departmental discussions about the best ways to set up plot, when to use setting and when not to, how ambiguity hurts or helps a narrative. On the few occasions his opinion *was* asked, he responded by way of analogy, usually giving two examples so as not to take sides. At least he was respected, if only for his knowledge of the work that had come before. Most of his colleagues seemed more concerned with the work yet to come—namely, their own.

"This'll make a great story for them," he said. He was staring at his reflection in the glass covering the clock-face; somehow, seeing himself physically manifested before his eyes made speaking seem demented, perverted. He turned away, then immediately turned back again to see what time it was. Ten-thirty. And still hot, too. That was the one thing about the Midwest: in winter it was cold, and in summer it was hot, and the time of day didn't make much of a difference.

He wanted to look out the window, to see the darkness outside, but that would mean, of course, staring at his own reflection again. Unless he turned off the kitchen lights, in which case he would be looking towards the back of his property…towards the well.

Funny, how he couldn't seem to leave the kitchen. He didn't even feel safe in his office, where he had taken refuge six years ago. His bedroom had reminded him of Jess, and the rest of the house had been David's territory, the way a six-year-old boy will claim every bit of space if you let him. *Not my office*, Mark had told them. It was one of the few rules Mark had been able to enforce, and so of course after the accident his office was the only refuge in enemy territory, a neutral zone where the ghosts promised to stay out, as long as he set foot in the rest of the house at least once a day. And of course he'd had to—there was no fridge in his office to keep the beer cold.

The thing was, both his bedroom and the kitchen opened up on the back half of his property. He could make out the grove of trees, even this late. Couldn't see the well, but he knew exactly where it was. He wasn't surprised that Alex Little had fallen in; the cover had been meant to keep his *own* son out, not other children. Other people's children weren't his responsibility. "I was only trying to keep *my* son safe," he said, and thought that maybe he'd also said it to a reporter at some point over the weekend. On phone or in person? Not that it made much of a difference—if it appeared in print, it would certainly damn him further.

"Mark," his lawyer had said, "you have to be careful now. Watch what you say. Watch what you do. You're not in trouble, there's no way you *can* be, but you have to keep up appearances. You understand?"

"I understand," Mark said, three days later, alone. "Don't buy a lot of alcohol and don't say anything bad about Cassandra's family."

"You're not guilty of anything. No one thinks that. And hell, you're best friends with Chief Fischer, and you know how much people trust his judgment. Glen Fischer's got your back no matter what. So all you have to do is make sure you appear respectable. Your job, that's just a formality, and at the moment I'm not sure they can even do anything. And if they can, then they're doing it because they *have* to. They would do it to anyone in your position. Maybe that's not something you want to hear, but it's true, and it works in your favor. Just play it safe. Be cool. Got that?"

You knew you were in trouble when everything your lawyer said ended in a rhetorical question.

His phone started ringing again. It was in the other room, the living room, where he hardly went anymore. He listened to it, not speaking, not even thinking, until it stopped. A few seconds later he heard the beep that informed him of a voicemail. He'd heard countless such beeps over the past few days; not as many today, as the local reporters, neighbors, concerned citizens, extended family members, etc., began realizing that he wasn't about to call them back. He hadn't even checked his phone since Sunday. The battery would die soon enough, and then it wouldn't ring anymore. If anyone really wanted to talk to him, they would come out to the house, and maybe he would open the door, though more likely he would cower in his bedroom until they went away.

Oddly enough, the only person he wanted to talk to was Cassandra. And he, of course, was the last person *she* wanted to talk to. He wasn't sure why he had this urge all of a sudden; he had never much spoken to her in high school, except for one night after a

basketball game, and alcohol had been involved, and the possibility (changed to an actuality) of touching a girl's breast for the first time. He only remembered it because that was one of those things you remembered; surely she didn't, it had meant nothing to her and meant nothing to him after a couple of weeks, when by chance he'd wound up in bed with a girl—Samantha-something, her last name had rhymed with *wrap*—and things had escalated to a whole new level.

What's more, he wasn't sure what he would say to her. Not *I'm sorry*, because he wasn't responsible for anything. Not *How have things been*, because he knew how they'd gone—she was still the gossip of certain circles, whose members occasionally overlapped Mark's (or had, back when he'd been married, and Jess had insisted on attending public functions). He didn't even want to reminisce about the high school days, because they'd only had that one night in common, and a just couple classes.

Perhaps it was more of an obligation—he didn't *want* to talk to her, he *had* to. *Your son went missing on my property and people think I'm responsible.* Not a friendly prompt for a conversation. Mark didn't even want to insist upon his innocence. He just wanted to see her grief, her anger, to know from first-hand experience that someone else was suffering because of this. Her anguish took the form of threatened lawsuits, but it came from much the same place as his. He'd once lost a little boy as well.

At least his lawyer was keeping a sense of humor about things. *Nail her to her trailer door.* Cassandra Little didn't live in a trailer, but Mark couldn't blame anyone for thinking she did. Women like her usually wound up in trailer parks. Ex-husband in jail, a string of no-gooders as boyfriends—lovers, you were supposed to call them when they fell below a certain income line—and a son always dressed in tattered, slightly dirty

clothing. She could only afford a house in a halfway-respectable neighborhood because of the various companies she'd sued over the years. *Garage door not securely affixed. Insect level in Chinese food too high.* Most people laughed; Mark had once, before his own lawsuit. *Concrete pylon reinforcement of substandard quality.* It sounded funny, too. Concrete is concrete, you would've thought, if your wife and child hadn't plowed into it at sixty-five miles an hour.

Mark rubbed his eyes as he sat down. He'd been doing that a lot lately; at first, it had been a result of reading every news report he could find. Now he did it as a result of what he'd gleaned from those truncated two-column reports, the lengthy editorials, and the worried faces of local newscasters: no one, himself included, was going to be happy in quite some time.

Perhaps what worried him the most was how Glen Fischer had looked at him during the interrogation. "This is a bad business for all of us," Glen had said, and he wasn't a man to state the obvious. When Glen Fischer couldn't think of anything better to say than to point out what was right in front of his nose, you knew circumstances were going to take a turn for the worse. And they had, in just a matter of hours. One moment, Mark Greene is living a quiet life in his home, teaching summer school, working on his article concerning canine imagery in Russian formalist literature, while simultaneously prepping his syllabi for the fall semester; the next moment, he's afraid to leave his house, for fear that someone will throw stones at him and denounce him for witchcraft.

"The boy fell into the damn well," he said. "But he didn't come back up."

No body found either. Not his fault, though. Not Mark Greene's fault. Mark Greene was a teacher at a community college, taught non-English majors how to write

English papers. Occasionally, he taught a literature course, but mainly his focus was composition, because the College was always in need of composition instructors. No one wanted the job, so give it to Mark, he's a nice guy and doesn't complain much.

Too bad the papers hadn't picked up on that. He hadn't read the paper that day, but he'd read Saturday's, and Sunday's, and part of Monday's. He'd seen the looks the interviewers had given him. The people he'd seen in public. He could even understand. He would've been suspicious of someone in his situation. The one good thing about being a chronic composition instructor, you know how to read between the lines, to see what people are actually thinking. They would say *hello*, but they would mean *what the hell did you do*? Couldn't prove anything, because there was nothing to prove—but with no body either way, proof didn't much matter. The situation itself acted as proof. The fact that the well was on his property acted as proof.

"Possession is nine tenths of the law." He started to laugh, but it died halfway up his throat, and only a faint ember of it came out, a strangled sound barely audible in the cool quiet of the house. To distract himself, he tried to find the humming of the air conditioner. It was there, faint, distant. He tuned in on it, sipped his beer. Constant, melodic. Steady, never faltering, never changing. David had liked to fall asleep listening to it. In the winter, they'd had to leave a heater on in his room, despite the central heating that kept the house comfortable year-round. Mark needed to sleep in quiet, and so had Jess, but David needed something to lean his dreams against, a white static to keep the monsters at bay.

Thinking of his son, Mark slept, but he didn't dream. Or if he did, he wasn't aware of it. He was in his kitchen. He was awake. Or maybe he *was* dreaming; every-

thing was heavy, slow. Time passed; the clock gave way to midnight, to one in the morning. He could feel the cool polished wood pressing against his forehead, was aware of the drool pooling at the corner of his mouth. The hum of the air conditioner was magnified, thunderous, but comfortable. This is what it must have been like for David, but without the fear, the anxiety, the dreamless sense of being awake but not in control. *I could like this*, he said; he felt his mouth forming the words, but they were only in his head. If it had been good enough for David, it was good enough for him.

The phone roused him. He thought. Distant, though, quieter. Not as shrill. He slowly lifted his head from the table. He didn't glance at the clock. He blinked, wiped the drool from his face, peeled his hand off the beer can. Strange, but the ringing didn't seem to come from there. Had he moved his phone? He couldn't remember. Maybe he'd put it elsewhere. The last few days had been so monotonous, he'd often lost track of individual minutes or hours.

It was almost as though the ringing were originating behind him. He turned around. The kitchen door. He knew instinctively that's where the noise was coming from. It made no sense, but then, it wasn't his phone, was it? He focused in on the sound, noticed the different pitch changes, the slight hesitations, the subtler sounds lying underneath it.

Crying. It was a child's soft crying.

His first reaction wasn't fear—that came later, after a moment's consideration. Perhaps it was simultaneous—time didn't seem to move, everything was all at once, rushed. His first *conscious* reaction was relief—that the boy had come back, that the boy

was all right. A happy ending, and it would certainly settle the doubts about him as a father and an educator and a solid reliable man.

The fear hit him as he rose from the chair. Something pulled in his back, and instead of pain he felt terror. The sheer, insane horror that only comes during dreams, when you realize that you're dreaming and can't do anything about it. But this was real, this was happening, and the hopelessness he felt chilled him. Sweat dried on his skin, evaporated, and, still standing, he clutched himself, staring at the door, not looking through the window but lower, about where the boy's head would be, just beneath the glass.

"I can't," he said, but he wasn't sure what it was he couldn't do. Louder, to someone other than himself for the first time all day, he said, "Alex?"

The sobbing continued at the same volume and pace. He repeated the boy's name, twice, a third time, but he didn't move closer to the door, because another thought had gripped him. One child's crying, when it is so soft, is no different than another child's.

This is the logic that went through Mark's head. He didn't recognize it for what it was, but when he spoke again, he instinctively kept his voice low, so that only he could hear it.

"David?"

No change. If there had been, he would've dropped of a heart attack. Killed by gossip, booze, and memories. Killed by a slick patch of road and a subpar concrete pylon that had been torn down and replaced six years ago. And a just death it would have been, preferable to the many possibilities that he'd considered, especially in the year he'd spent in the liquor cabinet. Suicide had never been far away. He couldn't have pulled the trig-

ger or held a razor—he had never possessed such nerve. But he could drink himself to liver failure. He could smoke himself to lung cancer, drive recklessly, clog his arteries. He hadn't tried any of it, but he could have.

What the crying brought with it was like that—a possibility. It was *possible* that Alex Little was on the other side of that door, banged up but none the worse for wear, especially considering he'd fallen down a well and somehow managed to climb out, spend four days alone, and crawl back to just a few yards from where he'd injured himself. It was also *possible* that, on the other side of the door, young David Greene was crying for a father he hadn't seen in six years because, of course, death was the great equalizer *and* divider, and a boy gets lonely with no company to keep but spirits.

"It's a dream," Mark said. "That's possible. Or I'm going crazy. That's possible, too."

He closed his eyes, but the crying didn't go away. He opened his eyes and the crying was still there. He took a tentative step towards the door, almost as clumsy as the first step he'd taken forty years before. He took another step, and though the door was only a few feet away, it took him an eternity to make it. His mind was fogged, the crying was growing louder—not because he was getting closer, but because it was becoming more important, more substantial. The way things are when you wake up from a dream, reality gradually seeping back into your consciousness, one drop at a time.

Before he reached the door, he dropped to his knees. He did so intentionally; he did not want to look out the window. What if no one was there? What if someone *was*? The crying was loud now, louder than his phone had been all weekend. Mark pulled himself across the tiles, until his head rested against the door. He could feel the child's

coolness from the opposite side, as though the wood itself had the consistency of shadow. He whispered both names again, carefully pronouncing each syllable. No change in the sobbing, and if there had been he wouldn't have noticed, because by now his own sobs had grown so loud that they drowned out those coming from the darkness.

Robert

Robert was angry. The funny thing about when Robert got angry was that his cheeks went flush, so it looked like he was embarrassed at something. And when he was embarrassed, he had the exact same reaction, so it looked like he was angry. The gist of it was, you didn't mess with Robert either way. You let Robert do his thing and went along with it.

Such was Sean's ideology, at least. That's what he called it, too—his "ideology." He couldn't credit himself with the term—stole it from a book he'd read, whose title he couldn't remember; some meaningless paperback, at any rate, something he hadn't even enjoyed all that much—but he used it because it fit. You didn't mess with Robert; you let Robert do all the thinking, the planning, etc. Friendship could be that way at times; some people belonged in charge, and you had to concede to their natural authority. Sea wasn't always happy about it, but it was just the way things had to be. Robert called the shots.

Except that wasn't right, not always at least. Because behind every man was a woman, and behind Robert Fuller was Cassandra Little. An attractive woman—Sean lusted after her like crazy, and so did Jimmy, though neither dared even compliment her in Robert's presence—but a cold one, not a shadow but a block of stone. She didn't care for Robert's friends, even though Jimmy claimed to have slept with her a couple years ago. She wanted Robert to herself and resented any competition, which was why the guys hadn't been hanging out nearly as much these past couple months.

Sean saw the attraction, but didn't understand why Robert lingered. Sean wouldn't have; Cassandra didn't strike him as that kind of a woman, the kind who

wants—or even needs—commitment. Her husband—Sean didn't know if they were divorced or not—was in prison, and her kid seemed destined to be another piece of townie trash. You didn't take a kid from that environment and make him President of the United States.

Cassandra's boy went missing on a Friday night, which was usually the night the three guys hit the bowling alley; since Robert and Cassandra had hooked up, the guys pretty much only went out on the weekends. Robert didn't bother to call about the change in plans; Sean and Jimmy went to the alley by themselves, having heard the news ahead of time from practically the whole damned town and knowing that Robert would be spending the night with Cassandra. The two men drank in practical silence. It wasn't the first time that Sean realized that Robert was their anchor, their center; he and Jimmy just didn't have much in common. They had back in college, and for a couple years after, but things changed when Sean dropped out. Jimmy's marriage had widened the gap, and even though they'd since gotten a divorce, the two men hadn't gotten as close as they had once been.

Sean had Saturday off, so once he got out of bed he spent a good part of the day trying to figure out what'd happened. Apparently the boy had fallen down a well and climbed out; no one actually said as much, but the boy wasn't *in* the well, which meant he had to've climbed out. Simple logic, which apparently no one else could figure out. They were all too flustered was the problem. The simplest solution was the right one, Sean's father had always said. Most people just didn't get that.

There wasn't much to report except gossip, and Sean hated gossip. People had always gossiped about him, at least back in high school; now, he didn't matter enough to

be talked about, and plus he wasn't from Chelmsford anyways. That was one of the perks of moving to another town, even a small one—you aren't surrounded by your past. Not that Sean had been a particular standout in his hometown, but the thought that so many people knew so many stories about him made him uneasy every time he left his house. In Chelmsford, people may know things about him, but they were things he *let* them know, not stupid shit he did when he was a kid and drunk.

Robert didn't call until Monday night, which didn't surprise Sean much—Robert was probably taking full advantage of Cassandra's vulnerability, a rare state for her. What *did* take Sean by surprise was Robert's tone of voice when he called that night: curt, stiff, not the friendly banter Sean was used to. "The alley at nine," Robert said, and waited for Sean to agree before hanging up.

Sean went to the bowling alley that night in a mood to drink, but as soon as he got there he realized that it wasn't going to be a drinking night. When Robert was in a mood to talk about something, drinking came second, usually at the expense of Sean's good time, because Robert typically wanted to talk about himself. Not that Sean had anything *he* wanted to talk about; he wasn't one to open up like that. But he didn't like listening to Robert talk about himself, because it was seldom true, and was slightly—if unintentionally—demeaning to whomever he was conversing with.

Jimmy was already there, sitting in a booth across from Robert. Sean took his seat beside Jimmy. A pitcher of beer was already on the table, but both Robert's and Jimmy's glasses were empty. Sean hesitated a moment, then poured himself a drink before even saying hello. It was Saturday night, after all.

No one said anything. This was how Robert wanted it—if Robert wanted conversation, he would start talking. Sean and Jimmy just waited patiently; Jimmy finally poured himself half a glass and sipped at it. Sean glanced around the bar. Even on the weekends, the bowling alley bar wasn't the liveliest place, and on Monday night they were the only customers. The bartender had even left the room and was talking with the guys who worked the lanes. A few people were bowling, high school students mostly, and the only music in the bar was what filtered in from the lanes. Some old Madonna tune, Sean thought. One of those songs he was supposed to know but didn't, because he'd never really given a shit about pop music.

After a while, Robert's face relaxed. Not much, but enough for Sean to know that whatever Robert had been thinking, he'd thought it through enough to start talking about it.

"We need to do something," Robert said. His voice was low and worn, but not tired—there was anger simmering beneath that kept Sean on edge, kept his shoulders tensed and his fingers clenched tightly around the glass of beer. He didn't ask what Robert meant.

Robert didn't explain, not at first at least. He glanced at Jimmy and Sean, looking at each for a couple seconds. There wasn't any friendship in his eyes; this would be a business conversation, with Robert the employer and Jimmy and Sean his underlings.

"Cassandra's been talking to her lawyer," Robert said. "Son of a bitch says there's nothing he can do. Says that damn professor can't be held responsible."

Sean thought back to the articles he'd read. Cassandra's boy had fallen into a well belonging to a professor at CICC. The articles hadn't suggested that the professor was responsible…but, come to think of it, they hadn't said he *wasn't*, either.

"Greene," Sean said, the name coming to him. "Mark Greene."

"The fucking lawyer says Greene covered the well, so he can't be responsible. There's no evidence he did anything."

"Did he?" Jimmy asked.

Robert ignored him. "Cassandra's been riding my ass about that son of a bitch. Wants something done. Just 'cause she can't *prove* he did something doesn't mean he didn't do it."

Sean didn't try to follow the logic; it was easier that way. Besides, he could already see where Robert was going, and despite his instincts, he wasn't going to resist. Robert was upset; even when he was calm and rational, his bragging rarely amounted to anything. His words remained words.

Jimmy was still slow, though. Jimmy, with his better education, was always slow, and Sean sometimes figured it was an act. Not that Jimmy was secretly some genius; but he played dumb to play safe. A clever move, really, but it was one of the reasons Sean sometimes couldn't stand him.

"How could he?" Jimmy asked. "I mean, the kid fell down the well, right?"

Robert turned his eyes to Jimmy, who didn't quite wither, but slid a little further back in his seat, his head lowered. For a moment, Sean thought Robert was going to let it go, and he began to vent a sigh of relief, until Robert spoke.

"'The kid fell down the well.' No shit, Jimmy. No fucking shit. The kid fell down the well, but maybe he was *pushed* down, you know? 'Cause there's no way in hell he could've climbed out on his own. Someone had to've taken him out of there, and who else could it have been but Greene? Who else was out there?"

Jimmy mumbled something that might've been "okay." Robert glanced at Sean, who held his gaze for a second before nodding his head once and looking away. Just agree and move on. It was for the best.

Robert finally poured a glass of beer and finished it in one long swallow. Then he poured himself another glass, emptying the pitcher, which he slid across the table to Sean. "Get another one."

Sean did so. He glanced over his shoulder while he was at the bar, waiting for the bartender to return. Robert was leaning close to Jimmy, talking heatedly. For a moment, Sean felt a pang of regret. He didn't like being left out. Never mind that the conversation probably wasn't a pleasant one, and that whatever Robert was saying, it was something Sean didn't want to be on the receiving end of. It was what all of Sean's exes had called his "jealous streak"—always "jealous streak," never "jealousy." He didn't particularly like it, but didn't care enough to do anything about it. Women couldn't deal with it? Tough. That was part of being in a relationship in the first place.

The bartender took her time coming back in. She was a college kid, and while Sean knew he shouldn't begrudge her lack of interest—he was outside of her age range, and with his beard he looked even older—he still felt the back of his neck warming up. Perhaps it was just Robert's anger rubbing off on him. Sean had seen her in here before, and didn't mind checking her out, but he'd never felt inclined to arouse her interest.

Sometimes, you just had to know when to cut your losses, even before you started playing.

Once he got the beer, he went back to the table. "What the hell took you so long?" Robert asked, but the question was rhetorical and Sean didn't bother answering. He glanced at Jimmy, who seemed cowed.

"We need to do something," Robert said again. "We gotta think of something, something good." Instead of offering any ideas, he began drinking. Heavily. Sean tried to match him, but his heart wasn't in it anymore. He felt his age, which goddammit wasn't that old. That fucking bartender, ignoring him like that. Fucking Robert, with his bragging and self-interest. And Jimmy, who didn't have much to offer the friendship except a whipping post.

They drank. Some small talk circulated, but Robert answered all questions in monosyllabic grunts, and Jimmy and Sean never did have much to say to each other. After about an hour, well into the third pitcher, Sean said, "We can't do nothing serious, you know."

The words took him by surprise; he rarely called Robert on his bullshit, because it was just easier that way.

Robert thought about what Sean had said for a few seconds. Sean thought there was going to be a fight, but instead, Robert said, "What you mean?"

"You know what I mean, Robert. I mean…shit. What did you have in mind?"

"I'm thinking about it."

"But it can't be too serious." His voice was slurring; his anxiety was helping the beer work faster. Perhaps this was for the best; he could always attribute his words to the

booze. "I mean, hurt him or something. You know? That kind of shit is serious. I'm not going to prison."

"You only go to prison if you get caught," Jimmy said, in an obvious attempt to placate Robert.

Fortunately, Robert didn't need any soothing. He grinned and started laughing, deep bellows that shook the table. Sean relaxed; this was the Robert who was his friend, this was the man he enjoyed being around. Not the domineering Robert who knew everything and expected people to follow his lead, but the fun-loving, laughing, dirty-joke telling Robert who slapped your back and held your place at the bar while you took a piss. Despite his size, despite his reputation, when Robert laughed, he was a teen again, taking genuine delight in something, and you couldn't help but smile back.

"Jesus, Sean." Robert struggled to control himself. "Christ, buddy. You got one sick mind, you know that? Fuck, I wasn't thinking of *hurting* him."

But you were, Sean wanted to say. Because, yes, Robert *had been* thinking of that. And they all knew it.

Robert shook his head. "Hell. I was thinking…" The last traces of a smile slipped from his face. "I was thinking of talking to him. You know? I was thinking of paying him a visit and suggesting that it's best for him to come clean."

"How?" Jimmy asked, and Sean thought, *Shut up*.

"I don't know yet." Robert shrugged, as if it didn't matter. "But we'll have to be pretty damn convincing, if he can fool the Sheriff."

"They're buddies," Sean said. "I remember hearing that somewhere. Greene and the Sheriff go way back."

Robert's serious, angered demeanor returned in a flash. "You sure of that?"

"I heard it. Somewhere."

"Sheriff Fischer's a good guy," Jimmy said. "I mean, you know, he wouldn't let something like that come in the way of his investigation."

"You never know what cops will do," Robert said. He'd had a few run-ins with the police over the years—nothing serious, but enough to leave him with a bitter disposition towards anyone wearing a badge. To Sean, it just made sense—you fucked up, you dealt with the police. He'd had a DUI, and a few tickets, and he took them in stride, because if you did the things he did, you would get caught eventually. Robert took it personally, like he took everything. Every cop was out to get him, and every cop was potentially corrupt.

"I agree with Jimmy," Sean said, slowly. "I mean, it's not just the Sheriff looking into this. Lots of other people, too. He couldn't hide something like that."

Robert bit his lip but didn't argue. Instead, he said, "Well, maybe Greene is just really damned convincing."

"Maybe," Sean said, and stopped.

Robert glanced at him. The anger was on the backburner, but Sean could still see the flickering flames. Robert said, "Maybe?"

"Maybe…hell, Robert, maybe the guy didn't have anything to do with it. Doesn't that make sense? I mean, what the hell would he want with Cassandra's boy?"

"I don't know, Sean. I'm not a fucking pervert."

Sean swallowed his beer and inclined his head to indicate that he agreed.

"Besides," Robert added, "I'm just saying we talk to him."

"Right." Sean kept his voice free of irony; it wasn't that hard.

"Cassandra's convinced he had something to do with it. And whether he did or he didn't, I need to talk to the motherfucker so she'll get off my back. Maybe he didn't have anything to do with it. We won't know until we talk to him, will we?"

"Just talk."

"Just talk, Sean. Yeah, just talk. You can talk, can't you?"

"When?"

Robert glanced at his watch, and for a moment Sean thought they were going to pay the professor a visit that night. His stomach sank, and his last swallow of beer threatened to come back up. *Please, God, no.*

"Sometime," Robert said, and Sean could tell that, no, it wouldn't be that night. He quickly finished his glass to cover his relief, even though, at that moment, beer was the last thing he needed. He wanted to go home and sleep, to get away from all of this for a while.

"Sometime," Robert said again, and Sean knew that the rest of the week would be hell—each day could be *sometime*, each night, each hour. *Sometime* would be whenever Robert was ready, which was guaranteed to be exactly when Sean *wasn't.*

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It turned out to be Thursday night. Sean spent the week in a state of anxious anticipation, as though he were waiting for the results of a blood test. He could barely sleep, expecting his phone to ring, for Robert's hard, controlled voice to say, "The alley, nine o'clock."

When Robert did call, though, he didn't immediately get to the point. Robert began talking about having sex with Cassandra the night before, as though he were still in college and needed to brag. Sean listened and grunted where he needed to, but couldn't get out more than two syllables.

Finally, his voice casual, Robert said, "We're gonna have that talk tonight. Why don't we meet at the alley around ten? Have a couple beers, think about what we're gonna say."

"Fuck that," Sean said, when he'd hung up. "No fucking way."

But he would do it. He knew he would. Willingly, too, because, push come to shove, Robert would probably do the same for him.

He arrived at the bowling alley at nine-fifty. Jimmy was already there, but Robert wasn't. Jimmy was pale, withdrawn; he didn't even look up as Sean slid into the booth next to him. The bar, again, was mostly empty, though several college-age kids were out at the lanes. Sean remembered his college days, the drinking and carousing, and then realized that his life now wasn't all that different. Some people looked down on that; to Sean, it was a form of extended youth. He had a life, when so many people his age had married and settled down.

Robert came in ten minutes late. During that time, neither Sean nor Jimmy ordered anything to drink. Robert bought two pitchers and shots; the bartender had to bring it over on a tray, the first time Sean had seen anyone do that at the alley. The bartender was an older lady, a couple years Sean's senior, and her smile lingered on him a little longer than it did the others. He didn't return it, even though she wasn't that bad looking, and any other night he would've considered it. Tonight, she disgusted him—the thought

of touching her, of her touching him, made him shiver, and he avoided eye contact as she set a shot and beer glass in front of him.

"Drink up," Robert said, when the bartender left. "I've got a plan."

They drank, and Robert talked. The plan made sense, in a twisted sort of way. Only an arrogant mind like Robert's could've conceived of it, but Sean acknowledged its brilliance—*if* Greene were guilty, and that was a big fucking "if," then he was sure to confess.

Robert was cool. Robert was ready. But Jimmy and Sean needed to be drunk, and Robert knew this. He let them drink, consuming as much alcohol as they did, though it didn't affect him half as much. He was already drunk on rage, on anticipation, and Sean tried to drink enough to catch up to him. He was convinced Robert meant to try—that they were actually doing something. He tried to drink away the anxiety this caused, the sense of unreality. His head started swimming by the time the first pitcher was done. Robert ordered another round of shots. The bartender didn't try to flirt with Sean this time. Perhaps she suspected. Surely they looked like guys who were up to something.

They left at closing time. Robert had all the necessary supplies in his truck, and so they headed straight to the Greene property, parking a short ways away. Robert carried the jar of gasoline; Jimmy and Sean held the wooden baseball bats. *Just for show*, Robert had said, though he hadn't put much effort in it, as though he knew how transparent the lie would be. Neither Sean nor Jimmy protested, however. Sean kept thinking about that, as they crept across Greene's property, glancing at the nearest houses, none of them too close because this wasn't really Chelmsford anymore, but the land just outside Chelmsford, where the town ended and the county's wilderness began. Sean hadn't pro-

tested, hadn't said, *No baseball bats, Robert.* Blame it on the beer all you wanted, he'd taken it when it was handed to him.

There was a light on at the back of Greene's house; glancing in the window, Sean could see a man slumped at a small kitchen table, head down, a bottle of beer unconsciously clutched in his hand. It was a pitiful sight but, yes, there was something *guilty* about it, as though Greene had some secret that he needed to drink away. Sean's breathing deepened; the July night pressed down on him, the heat and humidity taking its toll. He felt ten pounds heavier. He wanted to say that they shouldn't do this, but he stared at the slump of Greene's back and pictured the baseball bat hitting it, the man crying out in pain and saying that yes, yes, he'd killed Cassandra's son, he was sorry but yes he'd done it, just stop, just stop—

"I'll stay here," Robert said. He took Jimmy's baseball bat. "You two go out to the well. You know what to do."

They started out. Jimmy now held the gasoline, keeping it safely in front of him, as though it would explode at any moment. Sean took the flashlight Robert had given him from his pocket. The night was clear and open, and the small circle of light seemed alien, some kind of dangerous invader. Sean would've turned it off, but he was too drunk to trust his eyes alone; as incriminating as this flashlight was, it was the only thing keeping him from accidentally tumbling into the well. Which would've been ironic, in its own way, and wasn't that a fucking hoot.

They reached the well in just a few minutes. Jimmy poured the gasoline in a circle around the well, then threw the jar aside. He took out a disposable lighter, struck it, and threw it into the circle. The flame caught the fumes before it reached the ground; a

sudden spurt of fire caused both men to jump back in surprise. Sean dropped his bat, then kicked it out of the flames and grabbed it again, clutching it desperately. The circle roared to life, and he turned the flashlight off and put it back in his pocket. Then he and Jimmy went into the shadows and waited.

By now, Robert would be knocking at the door. Banging, if necessary. He'd been out here the past few nights, had observed Greene's habits. The man had taken to staying up late in his kitchen, drinking. He would be disoriented, drunk. The perfect victim, as Robert had said. Liable to tell the truth, and with little prompting.

Sean closed his eyes. He let the sounds of the night settle around him. The crackling of the fire, the crickets and cicadas, the wind across the uncut grass. The grove of trees offered shelter, so many places to hide; he felt forgotten, lost, a relic. He could disappear here; the dancing firelight would melt him into shadow, and he would drift away from all this, all of it gone just like that. So simple. Just melt away.

Jimmy nudged him awake. "They're coming," he whispered, or tried to whisper. It came as a revelation to Sean how drunk Jimmy was, mainly because that was a sign of how drunk *Sean* was.

Jesus, he thought, *are we really doing this? We are, aren't we*?

A figure was stumbling toward the grove of trees, a flashlight in hand. Greene. He was walking haphazardly, aroused from a drunken slumber, frightened by the flames and whatever Robert had done to get him outside. And—yes, there behind him, slinking at a distance, was Robert, the baseball bat held ready for attack. As though he were stalking the professor, herding the man into a trap. The thought turned Sean's stomach, and there were a few seconds in which he thought he would ruin everything by vomiting, but

it passed and he stepped further back into the shadows as Greene finally reached the grove of trees. Sean still couldn't see the man's face; the firelight hid rather than accented anything personal about the man. Greene was just a shadow, a shape fumbling through the dark.

"Who's there? Who the hell is there?" Even Greene's voice was disembodied—it could have come from anywhere in the grove.

Then Greene fell, the flashlight spilling from his hand, the glass shattering and the bulb going dark. The bat was just a wisp of blackness, an ethereal shape arcing through the dancing firelight. It made no sound, at least none that Sean could hear above the blood pumping in his ears and his own wet gasps. He watched its repeated path, up then down, without thought, without comprehension. He wasn't aware of Jimmy, standing beside him; he didn't notice that he'd dropped the flashlight, that it too had broken against the ground. The heat of the fire mingled with the humid warmth of the July night, but Sean was cold inside, his skin prickled with goosebumps. There was a clammy sweat under his arms, and this was the only thing that he sensed—that dampness against his flesh, his shirt clinging coldly to him, suffocating.

"What did you do to Alex Little? What did you do, you son of a bitch?"

The question came through slowly, only as the bat slowed down, as its hypnotic descent through the night became more erratic. Sean slowly gained feeling in his legs and arms; he was aware of the heat against his skin, pressing against the coldness he felt inside. He closed his eyes, and in his mind he pictured Robert's face, twisted and monstrous, not the face of his friend but that of a creature that belonged in children's closets.

He heard laughter, and even though it was only in his head, he covered his ears to stop it, began to cry to distract himself. He turned away, falling to his knees and vomiting.

Sean didn't stop crying until the sirens began, at first remote, so distant that they didn't seem to get any closer. He crouched there on all fours, head down, vomit trickling from his lips, grateful for the distraction, for the steadily growing whine that pierced the horror of the darkness like a bullet. For the first time since childhood, Sean felt like praying. He didn't know what to say, didn't even know what thoughts he meant to express—but he prayed nonetheless, silently, to no one. The only response he received was Robert's slap on the back, which wasn't good enough, and so he stayed there, huddled against the fire, waiting for an answer, any answer, to come.

Shadow Boy

Glen Fischer had a multitude of reasons to be stressed. The late July heat, accompanied by the late July humidity, that annually compressed the central portion of Illinois into a pressurized ball of tension and frustration. The missing child, Alex Little, age seven, short blond hair, last seen in an orange shirt and faded denim shorts, the kind of clothing you expect to see on a kid from his economic background. Alex's mother, Cassandra, waging a one-woman war against Glen's friend, Mark Greene, whom she blamed for the boy's disappearance. Robert Fulton, Cassandra's boyfriend, who—along with two accomplices, both of whom may have been coerced into it—had beaten Mark Greene into a coma. Glen's wife, Melody, who was feeling the pressure of his job but didn't want to disturb him with it, though she was a terrible actress and the strain clearly showed on her face every morning.

The worst part, the thing that had kept Glen awake for the better part of the past seven nights, was his failure to find the boy. He had little hope of finding Alex alive by now. When a child falls down a well, even if he has the strength to make his way out again, he can't last a week on his own.

And there wasn't any sign that he'd made it out of the well. Glen had believed so, early on; but the only blood found in the well was at the bottom, suggesting that the boy had indeed hit the ground. However, there were no signs that the boy had scrambled out of the well—no footsteps or claw marks suggesting that he had crawled or stood, or that he had moved at all. The boy should've been found broken at the bottom of the well. But all they'd found were a few traces of blood and his hat.

Glen had nightmares. He'd had them for the past few years, ever since he and Melody had discovered they couldn't have children. It'd bothered him more than her; she had cried hardest, but he cried longest. They'd talked of adoption, but he'd started having the dreams, and Melody—usually not superstitious—took it as a sign. No children for them.

The dreams always revolved around a child, usually anonymous, though lately it had begun to take the shape of Alex Little. A child in shadow, shifting, hazy. The surroundings changed—their house, a field, the grove of trees where Alex had fallen—but the figure was the same, the gesture the same: one arm raising, passing slowly across his chest, a slight inclination of the head. Glen had never seen anyone make the gesture before, had no idea what it could possibly mean. He didn't attach significance to dreams, only causes—namely, his stress. He didn't try to interpret it, and for a while he'd let Melody believe that he *wasn't* having the dream at least two or three times a month.

But he couldn't hide the nightmare every night. In the past week, he'd taken to sleeping his two or three hours a night on the couch. Melody knew; he could tell, but she said nothing, just looked at him across the dinner table, on the rare occasions they were able to have a meal together. Part of him wanted her to say something. The rest of him was glad she kept quiet; it made it easier for him to maintain his public composure, to emphasize that they were looking for a *boy* and not a *body*.

It was hard though, especially with the weather. There'd been warmer Julys, and more humid Julys, but the weather was only a small factor in the ever-increasing heat. Glen saw the way people looked at him. If there had been doubt in their eyes, it would have been one thing—doubt was bad, but it meant you had a hill to climb, with an opti-

mistic outcome possible. He saw no hope in the eyes of the Charleston County residents. He saw resentment, fear, ignorance. They didn't understand how he'd failed them, but they knew that he had.

Glen knew it himself. He'd never been one for "duty." A man did his job, whatever it was, unless he had something better to do. Glen's job was to serve Charleston County as best he could, and aside from his wife, he had found little better in life. It was what he wanted to do; it wasn't his "calling," because he didn't believe in anything as grand as that. It was his job; he was paid to do it and he did it well, at least well enough to hold the position for over a decade. He took pride in swift and fair justice as much as a carpenter may take pride in a sturdy house frame; it was a sign of personal accomplishment, something at which he could look back and say, "I did that."

But his work was coming undone because of the past week. Seven days exactly, almost down to the hour—another ten minutes, and it would be the exact time 911 had received the call. The day was exactly the same—few clouds in the sky, wind slight, the sound of lawn mowers and automobiles echoing throughout Chelmsford. Glen Fischer sat outside the Charleston County Courthouse and pondered how soon it would be before he had to hand in his resignation. An elderly lady—much too old to be out in this heat—passed him. He was in full uniform, hat on his lap, but she didn't look at him. She glanced across the street, although there was nothing to look at. Glen sighed.

He'd come to the courthouse to ask some more questions of the three men who'd beaten Mark Greene. He was pretty sure the other two would turn on Fulton. That was all right. Back when he'd first started in law enforcement, he wouldn't have been satisfied—justice for everyone, no clemency for the guilty. But there were varying degrees of

guilt, which came to light only after experiencing them first-hand. The attack had been Fulton's idea, and though Glen wanted revenge as well as justice—something he made sure to hide from everyone but Melody—he would settle for one man on the gallows, so to speak. The other two were harmless on their own; they needed a ringleader, a motivator, a scapegoat for their own desires. The three had been friends for years, but in a situation as stressful as this one, it didn't take much prompting for them to separate.

That was pretty much how Glen felt about his constituents. Granted, a missing child was hardly a little thing. It was the uncertainty that did it. When someone was murdered, you knew there were both a victim and a perpetrator; not only that, but in Charleston County, the perpetrator was almost always apprehended within seventy-two hours (usually much less). The same went for robbery, domestic abuse, drunk driving—the typical things that popped up in a Midwestern college town. There was no mystery, no lingering doubt.

Glen stood up from the bench, glancing at his watch. Time was moving too quickly. The days tended to drag on by this point of the summer—the weather was too hot, the cool of spring and fall too distant in either direction. But for Glen, everything was happening too fast. It felt as though he hadn't had enough time to find Alex; if only the days would slow down, they would find something, a clue, a lead, a plausible scenario as to what had happened. Time was the culprit, not him; time itself was inhibiting their search.

Glen put his hat back on. Too much heat. Ever since he'd started losing his hair, he hadn't been able to stay out in the sun very long. Melody liked to joke that the sun couldn't confuse what was already tangled, but Glen had begun to worry. It might mean

that he and Mark would have to cut back on the golfing, which had been his primary stress-relieving activity in the past decade.

Of course, that fear was based on two conditions: one, that Mark would ever be capable of playing again; and two, that Glen would still have a job. Forced retirement would be stressful, but even eighteen holes and a couple of hot dogs wouldn't ease the pain.

The town square was dead. All of the stores were open, but no one was going in or out of them. Chelmsford was terrified. The last search party had gone out on Wednesday; Glen had tried organizing one yesterday, but only four people had shown up, three deputies and a reporter who'd looked bored and desperate. It wasn't because people had stopped caring. Instead, it was a sign of something worse: the lack of resolution was beginning to take its toll. The hardest part in missing child cases, Glen had been taught during his training years ago, was the agony of waiting.

In the window of the guitar shop across the street, Glen noticed a man watching him. The proprietor. Glen waved slowly, and after a few seconds, the gesture was returned. It appeared obligatory, but that could just have been the distance, heat, and Glen's own disheartened demeanor.

He turned around and walked up the courthouse steps. He couldn't remember why he'd come outside; fresh air had been the excuse he'd given, but there had been another reason. It wasn't important, but he felt that he should at least know what had brought him out here. The sun had done its trick on him—he couldn't think back to more than a couple minutes ago. What had been worth leaving the air-conditioned comfort of

the courthouse, but wasn't important enough to remember? Going back inside, Glen decided there were too many mysteries in life, and even the benign ones had consequences.

The cool air drifted over him, drying his sweat instantly. He shivered. The glass door closed behind him, and he turned around, glancing up at the sky. Peaceful. In his youth, days like this had been perfect for fishing. Or had that been someone else's childhood, a childhood fashioned from television and movies? Glen couldn't remember ever once going fishing as a boy, yet he knew he had on several occasions. He remembered a red bamboo fishing pole, or maybe it was just thick reed; you tied a string to the end of it, attached a hook and some bait, and fished the old fashioned way, no reel, no line, no lure. He could picture the pole perfectly—black flaws in its shaft, curving slightly to the left, then back right. He just couldn't remember ever having used it.

The moisture on his cheek surprised him; his eyes had become misty. He wiped them, not sad or worried but confused. In the back of his mind, he'd been fearing a breakdown. Not just recently, not just because of Alex Little, but because of everything. No kids—ever. A wife who had too much faith in him and too little in herself. Advancing age, creeping slowly across the horizon like an evening shadow. And now a missing child, and his best friend in a coma. It was his job to handle this with dignity, and he took pride in a job well done—but that didn't mean he was capable of doing it much longer. Maybe he wouldn't wait for the not-so-casual hint. Maybe he would resign.

The thought unnerved him simply because it had never occurred before. He didn't believe in never quitting—sometimes you *had* to quit—but he had never once, not for a single moment, considered leaving the force. He had planned on running for reelection until he simply couldn't. This job suited him, and he suited it.

So where were these thoughts coming from? The sun? Or maybe the old lady who'd ignored him, or the storeowner who hadn't. Or maybe the cause was his own mind, his own self-doubt that had been in hiding, waiting for the perfect moment to spring forward and cloud everything. They hit you when you're down, and usually the first blow comes from yourself. He wasn't sure who'd said that; he thought maybe his grandfather. Or possibly he'd just made it up.

Glen turned and walked further into the courthouse. It was a relatively small structure, but no matter how much time he spent there, he had a hard time finding his way. There was something about high arches and spacious lighting that threw off his judgment. The building was old but made to look older, as though age were the standard by which justice was measured. Somewhere near the back of the building, in the basement, the three men were waiting in separate rooms. Glen had skipped the interrogation rooms at the Sheriff's Office, figuring the luxury of the courthouse would work to lull Fulton into a false state of confidence, and soothe the other two men to the point where they realized they had something to gain by turning on their friend. So far it was working, but Glen couldn't work up much enthusiasm about it. He kept picturing Mark Greene's face as he'd last seen it, blank and white. His friend's breathing had been shallow and light, like a half-hearted breeze drifting across a cornfield.

The sound reminded him of his dream. He wasn't sure why—the boy in shadows was never accompanied by noise. And yet, if the child *had* made a noise, Glen knew it would sound like Mark's breathing—the unconscious breaths of a lost and defeated individual. He began thinking of Alex Little again, and latched onto the boy's face—something concrete that he could clutch, something that motivated him to take action. He

had to find that boy, and couldn't afford to stop and worry about whether or not it was even possible to do so.

The nearest guard nodded at him. Glen returned the gesture. With all the budget cuts that had been going on throughout the state, surely it wasn't necessary to keep so many security guards at a courthouse that had never once, so far as Glen knew, received any specific threat. Nothing of great enough importance ever happened here. The guard was armed with a nightstick and mace, both of which swung from his belt. He seemed bored, his mind on other things. Glen couldn't blame him.

Instead of going straight to the basement—assuming he could find the way without asking for directions again—Glen went into the nearest restroom. In the mirror, he saw a red, flushed face that he vaguely recognized as his own; he took off his hat and glanced at the way it had patted down his remaining hair, making it seem as though he had less than he did. He ran his hands through it, but couldn't get it propped up again. There just wasn't enough. He stared at his scalp, hating that it had been there his whole life, waiting for almost four decades to show itself. His body had betrayed him, as it did all men eventually. That didn't mean he had to like it, and it did not mean he had to accept it. He put his hat back on defiantly, twisting it down too tightly.

As he was leaving the bathroom, he noticed a noise in the background, a steady humming that seemed familiar, though he couldn't quite place it. Back in the main entry hall, he glanced at the guard, wondering if the man heard it too. He did. The guard was over near the doors.

Glen joined him. "What is that?" he asked. The noise had increased.

The guard started, then shook his head. "Dunno."

The sound was getting louder. Glen glanced up at the sky, wondering if a plane was passing overhead. Nothing. He shrugged it off, glanced at his watch and turned around. He was taking too long. He should've been back downstairs fifteen minutes ago. He didn't care how the prisoners felt, but his deputies had to be wondering what had happened to him. Couldn't let anyone doubt him at this point—he had to keep whatever respect he still had, whatever confidence in his skills as a lawman still lingered in the consensus of the people. .

But Glen didn't head immediately downstairs. He stood just a few feet from the door, staring at his watch, because it was the exact time, just a minute after, that 911 had received the call reporting that Alex Little had fallen down the well. A week. An entire week of hell, from which Glen had not felt a moment's respite.

The shadow boy returned to him. It wasn't a waking dream, and it wasn't an hallucination. It was a memory, the most vivid memory Glen had ever experienced: he could remember every vague detail from his dream, the shifting arm, the nodding head, as though he had seen it with his own eyes just a minute before. The boy's features were still hidden, but from what faint traces of clothing Glen could see, the child appeared to be wearing clothing very similar to what Alex Little had worn on the day of his disappearance.

Glen stumbled. He leaned against the wall, resting his head against the cool marble. He could hear the guard asking about him, but he didn't bother to respond. The noise had gotten louder, and for a moment he was sure he had misunderstood the guard—the noise was in Glen's head, no one else could hear it because this was the sound of re-

solve crumbling, of a man's will caving to stress and pressure. This was what it sounded like to go insane.

But no—the guard was shouting, and he was no longer shouting at Glen. The air seemed to vibrate, the wall shook, and as the noise increased, Glen pushed himself away from the wall, forced himself to focus. Plane crash? Earthquake? He turned and glanced out the doors, into the clear sky, open, deep and welcoming, and he finally placed the sound: he'd heard it only once, thankfully, as a child, one May afternoon when a storm had rushed in from the west.

Tornado.

He grabbed the guard and pulled the man away from the glass. It made no sense. It was crazy. There wasn't a single cloud in the goddamn sky. But the street outside was in chaos. The air had taken the consistency of sawdust, with loose debris swirling about, slamming against the glass in front of his face. A streetlight fell, then a telephone pole, the broken wires live and furious. A car tumbled by, an old Pontiac; its front license plate tore away and smashed against the courthouse steps. The glass storefront across the street shattered, and Glen turned away only a second before the courthouse doors did the same.

He hauled the guard towards the bathroom. Both of them were yelling, but the guard seemed to be doing so on instinct—he was otherwise inert, leaning on Glen, hollering meaningless syllables but not thinking. Shock. Glen could feel it working its way up his spine as well. Disbelief. Incredulity. This wasn't happening. That was the one clear thought in his head. This wasn't happening. He knew it to be untrue, but it was the only thing swirling about in his head, carried on diabolical winds that threatened to wipe his

sanity clean away—it was the only thought he could pull from the chaos, and he fell onto it with his last ounce of certainty, as the bathroom door opened before him and the two men tumbled onto the tile floor.

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The guard's name was Fredrick. He had a girlfriend, an infant daughter, and a tendency to wet himself in times of extreme duress. Glen tried to imagine the kind of life that flashed before Fredrick's eyes, because his own life seemed far too short: he pictured Melody, their home, and the golden retriever he'd had as a kid. That was everything. In that moment, he couldn't think of a single other thing that mattered. Everything else came afterwards, a flood of memories and images in the wake of the tornado.

It hadn't been a storm; everyone asserted to that. There had been a tornado—an office worker on the top floor had actually seen the funnel—but no thunder, no lightning, no rain, no clouds. Just a twister, which Chelmsford hadn't seen in over twenty years.

Glen radioed his deputies downstairs, and received word that everyone was fine. He instructed the deputies to detain the three prisoners, then join him outside. Without waiting for an affirmation, Glen left the courthouse. He stepped through the glass doors, which had been reduced to iridescent shards that, in the afternoon sun, were momentarily blinding.

The square had been devastated. The tornado had cut a clean swath through Chelmsford. Clean and straight—Glen wasn't an expert at reading tracks or trails, but he could tell the tornado's path had been primarily steady, a straight line extending from the southwestern corner of town northward. Part of his mind registered the fact that Alex Little had disappeared in that direction, but he pushed it away and didn't think of it again.

Glen stood in the middle of the debris, looking around. Sirens sounded in the distance, in the direction of the firehouse. One of his deputies was rounding the eastern corner of the square, coming from the station to get him. Glen's car, which had been parked immediately outside the courthouse steps, was several yards away, mostly undamaged; other vehicles had been thrown atop each other, and one was driven through a shop window. But all the buildings stood mostly intact—a section of the courthouse roof was gone, but that seemed to be the worst of the damage in the immediate area.

There were countless things he was supposed to do now. Expectations to be met, people to call, questions to be answered. Why had there been no warning? How many people were injured? What measures should he take to prevent looting? These were all pressing matters, but there was one question that he concerned himself with:

Where had the tornado come from?

"From the southwest," he said. His voice was steady, as though he were talking to someone immediately in front of him, but no one glanced his way. He repeated it internally, even as he got to work helping the arriving paramedics. He wouldn't realize, until he lay down on he couch that night, that he had forgotten all about the missing child. In his dream that night, the boy's face no longer mattered. When Glen woke up in a cold sweat, shaking enough to rock the sofa's springs, it would be the wind that terrified him, the gently blowing breeze that escalated to a roaring frenzy moments before he woke up.

The Wake

Clint liked to follow the tornado's path. He wasn't sure why. He *had* to follow it, as part of his job—start at the northeastern end of town and travel southwestward, picking up debris. He was on his fifth or sixth trip by now, the garbage truck's rumbling like a second heartbeat to him. He'd never enjoyed his route as he did now. Perhaps it was a form of reassurance—after all, his house was still intact, he and his family hadn't lost anything. Not that Clint took pleasure in the suffering of others, even if it was to reaffirm his own good luck.

There was just something comforting to him about the straight, even path the twister took. He wasn't alone in this. The Tornado's Wake (as it would come to be called) was a wonder to most of Chelmsford's citizens, even those who had lived in its path. Tornados aren't so single-minded, weather forecasters repeatedly assured their viewers. A freak storm, a freak occurrence, not a cloud in the sky, an unknown weather phenomenon, a miracle of modern meteorology.

The Tornado's Wake began—in the reverse pathology that most of Chelmsford took in the days ahead—at the far northeastern edge of city limits. This is where Clint began his journey, every morning and several times during the day. He and Eric, his driver, would head southwest, inch by inch, talking to people who were still in tears, picking up the remnants of what had been homes, heirlooms, priceless memories. These scraps of life would be thrown into the back of the garbage trucks, Clint's and others, ground down to splinters and shards. When the truck was full, the debris would be taken to the county dump, deposited like any other mound of garbage atop the steadily growing

accumulation of items that the Charleston County citizens had discovered they could do without.

The Tornado's Wake was long, a diagonal swath across town, but no one ever followed it the entire way. Two trucks and a wrecking crew had helped to tear down what remained of the Greene house. But no one else. No one else ventured that far, because at the very end of the Tornado's Wake (really the start, which no one in Chelmsford ever bothered to admit to themselves) was a dismantled grove of trees, ripped and torn, a pile of useless lumber. Buried beneath the trees were scattered stones that had once formed the lip of a well, an old well abandoned nearly a century ago but never filled in. Covered, but unfilled, like a secret left available at the periphery of consciousness. The boy had disappeared there; he had disappeared and was never found, and now he never would be. The tornado had taken care of that, Chelmsford assured itself. The evidence was gone, swept away in the rubble of the town. Chelmsford chose to look ahead, to the renovations and the reconstruction, to not linger on questions that could never be answered.

Picking up the wreckage would take weeks. Months. It was steady employment for Clint, the first he'd had in a long time. He had a knack for handling garbage, for shutting down his emotions and redirecting his mind elsewhere. He could do it, as could others. They could travel the Wake day after day, picking up what was left behind, the pieces of their lives that hadn't blown away. All it took was patience, and the ability to ignore the week preceding the tornado's destruction. To Clint, and to others, this wasn't just a tragedy. It was a job.